

Visions of Heaven and Hell from Late Antiquity in the Near East

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The *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, a late Middle Persian text thought to have been redacted in the tenth century,¹ is a report on the journey Ardā Wirāz' soul undertakes to the afterlife at the behest of religious leaders and the community. It first describes the community's concern regarding their belief in the Zoroastrian religion. Next, it relates how and why the community chose Ardā Wirāz and how they sent his soul to the afterlife. Lastly, it depicts Ardā Wirāz' description of how his soul reaches the afterlife where he meets two guides, Srōš and Ādur Yazd, who lead him through heaven, hell, and purgatory where souls are punished or rewarded for the good or bad deeds they have committed in the world of the living.

The *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* serves as a testament to the Zoroastrian community's need for answers to questions regarding their faith, since it confirms the efficacy of the community's religious practices and their adherence to the faith's tenets. Though the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* speaks particularly to the tenth century Zoroastrian community, it is not the only text to address such concerns. Echoes of its structure and, to a certain extent, its content are found in the following texts which also depict visions of heaven and hell through the eyes of a chosen community member: the *Dēnkard*² which depicts King Wištāsp's journey to heaven and hell; the inscription of the 3rd century head mōbed (Zoroastrian priest) Kirdīr; and early biographies and histories³ of the prophet Muḥammad which elaborate upon several enigmatic verses of the Qur'ān regarding his nocturnal journey (*'isrā*) and ascent (*mi'rāj*).⁴

¹ According to Gignoux's article, "Ardā Wirāz," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, "the final redaction of the text probably refers to the early Islamic period (see especially Ardā Wirāz 1.23-27 for an explanation of the journey's purposes)." See *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, s.v. "Ardā Wirāz", <http://www.iranica.com/newsite> (accessed May 26, 2009).

² The *Dēnkard* is an encyclopedia of Zoroastrianism written in Middle Persian and redacted in its final form in the 10th century.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze how *Ḥadīths* regarding Muḥammad's *'isrā* and *mi'rāj* were collected and treated from the seventh to the eighth century.

⁴ Verse one of *Sūrah XVII (al-Isrā')* specifically describes the experience of the journey: May He be glorified, He Who carried (*asrā*) His servant at night from *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* to *al-Masjid al-Aqṣá* which We have surrounded with blessings so that We may show him Our signs.

These texts also have the particular features of circumstance and provenance in common; they were composed in cosmopolitan cities where people of various ethnic origins and religious beliefs crossed paths or lived together in close quarters. In these cosmopolitan cities where there was a constant flux of different peoples, new ideas, and religions, the texts served more than just to admonish, forewarn, and to reassure adherents from within a faith. They were composed in reaction to the proximity and the influence of other religions and sects. For instance King Wištāsp, who was hesitant about accepting Zoroastrianism, undertook the journey to the afterlife to resolve his doubts. Zoroastrianism, the state religion of the Sasanians, was threatened by various off-shoots that were deemed heretical. In response, Kirdīr undertook the journey to the afterlife to bear witness to the veracity of Zoroastrianism. According to the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, different (mis)-beliefs were widespread and so the Zoroastrian community chooses Ardā Wirāz as the purest person to journey to the afterlife for answers.

In the eighth and ninth centuries C.E. in the Iranian areas of the former Sasanian empire, many people were to some extent bilingual (in varying degrees) out of necessity and were exposed to each other's ideas and religious beliefs (Āzarnūsh 2006, part 1). As stories of the ancient deeds of Iranian mytho-historical and historical kings and heroes circulated orally and, later, appeared in translations from Middle Persian into Arabic,⁵ so too were Zoroastrian ideas, beliefs, and pseudo-historical narratives and ideas circulating in that milieu. When commenting upon and interpreting the enigmatic and brief verses of Muḥammad's nocturnal journey and ascent, Muslim biographers and historians elaborated upon reports (*Hadīth*) from the prophet, his wife, relatives, and companions about the exact nature of his nocturnal journey and ascent. What resulted were extremely detailed and intricate narratives about Muḥammad's trip to heaven that evince structural affinities to Middle Persian ascension narratives. The *Arda Wirāz Nāmag*, in turn, was redacted into its final form in the tenth century, arguably as a response to the popularity the *'isrā* and *mi'rāj* stories were gaining.

Though all these works are unique in that they each speak to a particular group of people, nevertheless, they are products of dynamic societies and peoples who were constantly embroiled with one another and in the giving and receiving of new ideas. As a result, these texts absorbed and appropriated elements of vision texts from other religions in close proximity, while rejecting those religions as heretical or false.

⁵ For the stories reported to Ṭabarī "orally" by Iranians refer to Ṭabarī 1879, vol. 1.

The present paper focuses on the socio-cultural and religio-political conditions of early Islamic Iran that would have conduced the circulation of the *Ardā Wirāz* narrative⁶ among the eighth-tenth century Persian and Arab historians and theologians. Furthermore, the paper presents and analyses parallel structures and motifs between the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* and the section of Ibn Ishāq (C.E. 704-768)'s *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* on Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* for several reasons (which are detailed below) among which is that the latter is one of the earliest extant texts to represent the biography of the prophet based on earlier works that no longer exist.⁷

The Cultural Milieu of the Eighth-Tenth Centuries C.E. in the Eastern Islamic Empire

At the time of the Islamic conquest of Iran, translators were required for the demands of war, peace, conversion, and tax collecting. While it seems obvious that such a need existed, information regarding these translators, their profession, and what exactly they translated and/or propagated is scant (Āzarnūsh 2006, 14-18). Soon after the conquest in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, Arab-Muslim garrison troops were stationed in various regions of Iran. These troops began to intermingle with the locals and took part in the activities of the surrounding towns. Many eventually married local women and were assimilated. Others retained their Muslim-Arab identity while living and working among the locals. As for the locals, despite the conversion of the multitudes that took place for various economic, socio-political, and religious reasons, many retained their own religions and suffered the consequences (such as paying a poll-tax and spending their lives as second-class citizens or even as prisoners of war forced into slavery). These newly intermingled populations in the far eastern regions of the empire needed to communicate with one another for day-to-day issues. The need for translators and bilingual and even trilingual speakers increased exponentially from the time of the initial conquest. No doubt many such persons existed, although only a handful are mentioned in extant sources.

These populations and their bilingual speakers became partly responsible for the transmission of ideas with the caliphs' courts and local principalities also

⁶ I use the phrase "*Ardā Wirāz* narrative" as distinct from the text, *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, to demarcate the fact that the narrative was in circulation orally before its final redaction in the 10th century. For the possible origins of the *Ardā Wirāz* narrative, see Pourshariati 2008, 431-433.

playing dominant roles. The Umayyad caliphs (C.E. eighth-ninth century) made use of the former Sasanian administrative machine for the running of their new empire, retaining those among the scribes who were able to learn Arabic quickly. These bilingual (and often trilingual⁸) scribes became instrumental for the transmission of ideas.⁹ Following in the Umayyad tradition of retaining Iranian scribes and administrators, the 'Abbasid dynasty made use of bilingual Iranians as their scribes, viziers, and administrators.¹⁰

With the decline of the central caliphal power in the latter half of the ninth century, semi-autonomous principalities arose in Iran. The official court language of these Iranian principalities was primarily Arabic and even princes who spoke little or no Arabic patronized poets to eulogize them in Arabic (Āzarnūsh 2006, 138-140). Following upon the popularity of the Arabic encomiastic poems used widely in the Umayyad and especially 'Abbasid courts (despite the popularity of Middle Persian literature, albeit in the form of Arabic translations), the princes of these semi-autonomous principalities sponsored poets who came from those courts looking for patronage. In their turn, these migrant poets found willing patrons who were interested in being eulogized for posterity in the manner of the caliphs.¹¹ It was not until the Samanids established independent rule from the middle of the ninth to the end of the tenth century that Persian was used as a courtly language, that Arabic texts were translated into Persian, and that poetry was composed in Persian.

⁷ For more information on the importance of the transmission of reports on the life and deeds of the prophet and the reliability of transmitters see A. Guillaume 1967, Introduction; Abd al-'Aziz Duri 1983; and Tarif Khalidi 1996.

⁸ I would like to thank Awad Awad for pointing out the fact that some of these translators were well-versed in Christian and Syriac literatures. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the contributions they may have made to the genre of visions of heaven and hell literatures of the early Islamic period, a study would provide a more extensive view of the issue at hand. See Gutas 1998 for information regarding translators of Christian and Syriac works and their contributions to Arabic and Persian literature.

⁹ One of the most important figures of the Umayyad period (and whose works have been termed paradigmatic for Arabic literary style until the advent of the modern period) is Ibn Muqaffa', a Persian who translated many important Middle Persian texts into Arabic and composed many original texts in Arabic based on Middle Persian models. For more information on Ibn Muqaffa's important contribution to the development of Arabic literature refer to Cooperson 2005a.

¹⁰ The most prominent of them was Harūn al-Rashīd's vizier Yahyā Barmakī. In addition to patronizing poetry, Yahyā Barmakī commissioned many works, the most famous of which is the *Thousand and One Nights*, to be translated from Middle Persian into Arabic. The Barmakid family was of Persian origin and served the 'Abbasids. Many of the family members held high administrative positions in the 'Abbasid courts and served as tutors to the 'Abbasid princes until their downfall which began with Yahyā's execution (although al-Ma'mūn retained his old tutor as his advisor until he died of mysterious/suspicious causes); see Cooperson 2005b.

¹¹ This was partly due to the fact that the kings of these principalities were competing with the 'Abbasid courts.

The translations from Middle Persian into Arabic in the eighth and ninth centuries and the translations of those and other Arabic texts (especially texts of a religious nature¹²) into Persian by the Samanids in the ninth and tenth centuries provided the opportunity for literary styles and poetic arts to be developed in unique ways while older elements were retained. Such borrowings were not relegated to courts or to the arena of poetry and prose literature alone. Histories and theological ideas were also subject to incorporating and altering foreign concepts for various purposes (Dabiri 2007, 38-164).

In his article "Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte," Selheim argued that Iranian history was rewritten and composed in Arabic as a response to the Arab-centered Islamic histories being produced at the time (Selheim 1966, 33-91). The impetus to compose Islamic histories derived from Muslim identity which was born of religious and political considerations. This identity was fostered by a competition, one in which Muslim historians of the eighth and ninth centuries sought to place Arabs into the larger universal historical context, where Jews, Christians, Greeks, Indians, and Iranians were already well established with their respective "world" histories and far reaching religions. The need to place Arabs on to the historical universal picture was spearheaded by Ibn Ishāq (C.E. 704-768)'s now lost biography,¹³ *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, which in its narrative of the lives of the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad, contributed to giving the Arab-Muslim community its place in universal history.

Soon after Ibn Ishāq's work, ninth and tenth century historians such as Dīnavarī and Ṭabarī appropriated (in the case of Ṭabarī) and borrowed his techniques and reinvented Iranian history as Perso-Islamic history (Selheim 1966). Ṭabarī, with his authoritative and comprehensive history, appropriated Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* and Iranian history as it was transmitted by Iranian and Arab historians and the anonymous *dihqāns* (landed gentry)¹⁴. He subsequently turned Arab-Muslim history into a universal history that included Iranian history as part and parcel of the Judeo-Islamic tradition.¹⁵

Selheim's argument can be extended to describe how theological ideas were borrowed and simultaneously used to formulate new tenets which led to the formation of new theological schools. One particular Islamic theological school of thought, the Mu'tazili school, propounded the controversial tenet *manzilah*

¹² The earliest extant Persian translation of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* is by Rafī' al-Dīn Ishāq ibn Muḥammad Hamadānī (c. twelfth century C.E.). I would like to thank Hossein Kamaly for the reference.

¹³ While the biography as a whole is no longer extant, the text is partially preserved by his pupil (Ibn Hishām)'s work *Sīrat al-Nabī*.

¹⁴ For the significance of the *dihqāns* in the transmission of Persian history see Davis 1996.

¹⁵ For an extended version of this argument, refer to Dabiri 2007, chapter 2.

bayn al-manzilatayn (station between stations) as the place where Muslim sinners (believers who did not act according to the tenets of the religion) were fated. According to Wāsil (the propounder of the tenet and founding father of the Mu‘tazili school), the sinful believers are fated to the station between stations (i.e. between heaven and hell) since they rank between that of the righteous believer and the *kāfir* (infidel).

In his article, “On the Mazdeans and the Mu‘tazilah,” Siamak Adhami explores the possibility that Wāsil’s *manzilah bayn al-manzilatayn* (a term which appears nowhere in the Qur’ān or *Ḥadīth*¹⁶) originates from the Zoroastrian concept of purgatory—the place for those whose good deeds equal in measure their bad deeds. For Adhami, the Zoroastrian concept of *ham-mistagān* (purgatory), which is featured prominently in the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* and other Middle Persian texts, is a forerunner of Wāsil’s tenet, *manzilah bayn al-manzilatayn*. He argues this by back-tracing the concept from the latest Middle Persian texts (circa tenth century) to the *Avesta* and thus shows that the concept pre-dates Wāsil. He further justifies this by arguing that Wāsil was himself a Persian *mawlah* (client). The implicit argument is that Wāsil was, thus, influenced by Iranian traditions and the Zoroastrian religion because of his background.

The circumstance of Wāsil’s provenance and his status as a *mawlah* may have influenced his theological arguments. Nevertheless, it is argued here that Wāsil and his inner circle found inspiration and the answer to the solution of the fate of the sinful believers in Zoroastrian ideas and texts not just as a circumstance of birth, lineage, or ethno-cultural affiliation but also due to the fact that these ideas and texts were in wide circulation among the multi-cultural milieu of the Eastern Islamic empire in the eighth and ninth centuries. The latter argument is supported by the fact that Wāsil’s own teacher Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, from whom he broke over this tenet, was himself a *mawlah*.

Selheim’s argument can also be applied to answer how and why the *mi‘raj* stories gained popularity and became more elaborate as the years passed, especially if one subscribes to the idea that there was a historical and theological debate between Arabs and Iranians where, as outlined above, the demarcating line among the Iranians themselves (whether as *mawālī* or Zoroastrians) was often blurred. As noted above, Ibn Ishāq (though he too was a *mawlah*) composed a history that placed the Arabs on a par with their surrounding neighbors. One of the most significant ways in which he accomplished this was by careful-

¹⁶ A specific description of Muḥammad’s ascension is not given in the Qur’ān either. For more information refer to van Ess 1999, 48-49.

ly piecing together the disjointed narratives of Muḥammad's night journey and ascent, which provide positive proof of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, into a cohesive narrative that illustrates Muḥammad's supersession over the previous Biblical prophets (Ibn Hishām 1967, 269 and 275-276). The four reports in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* that describe Muḥammad's journey through heaven is summarily described here: As Muḥammad and his guide, the arch-angel Gabriel, approach the gates of each level of heaven, the guardians of those levels, who are the ancient Biblical prophets and figures (such as Jesus, Joseph, and Adam who sit at the lower levels of heaven), ask Gabriel two questions: 1-who is his companion and, upon learning his identity, 2-if Muḥammad has received his mission. Gabriel's answer to the second question is always a resounding "yes" (267). Upon Gabriel's affirmative answer, the prophet is able to pass through each level until he reaches the seventh level¹⁷ where, with Moses' assistance, he barter with God on the number of prayers his community is to perform. What is evident from these four reports is that the prophet's journey through heaven is parallel to his prophetic mission on earth: he is a newly appointed messenger of God and Islam is to supersede the other religions even if the adherents of the latter are unaware of Muḥammad's identity and mission.

While the reports themselves were intended to answer the doubters who plagued Muḥammad's early career, Ibn Ishāq's constructed narrative served as a competitive response to a later group, the eighth century Zoroastrians, who had their ancient histories and narratives in which their kings, priests, and prophets visit heaven and hell as proof of their religion's veracity. The similar structure and content of the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* and *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* illustrate this: 1-The context of the journey. The two messengers are sent to the afterlife at a time of distress; 2-The condition of their bodies and souls as they traverse the afterlife. Their spirits are sent into the afterlife at a time when the women of their families are present (and bear witness); 3-The guides. The angels are either sent to guide them or agree to guide them in the hereafter; 4-The guides' functions. Their guides either answer for them (as is the case with Muḥammad who appears when it is unclear to the guardians of heaven whether he has received his prophetic calling) or inquire into the reason for the visit into the afterlife (as is the case with *Ardā Wirāz*) and answer the questions both visitors ask regarding what they see or hear; 5-Visions of the afterlife. The similarities are primarily confined to four particular types of sinners and the punishments they receive.

¹⁷ In the Islamic tradition, no other Biblical prophet stands closer to Muḥammad than Moses whose story appears in the Qur'ān to comfort the prophet when the mockers and unbelievers beleaguered him most.

The Context

The *isrā* and *mi'rāj* narratives are strategically placed in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, as they are framed in between two other closely associated narratives. Preceding the *isrā*¹⁸ and *mi'rāj* narratives is: The Revelation 'Prophets Have Been Mocked Before You,'¹⁹ which describes Muḥammad's vexation in regard to the mockers, and following the narratives is: How God Dealt with the Mockers. The last line of the first narrative "Prophets have been mocked before you, but that which they scoffed at surrounded them" (Ibn Hishām, 266)²⁰ seems to suggest that the *isrā* and the *mi'rāj* narratives break the logical flow of the preceding and succeeding two narratives. However, as argued above, narratives of visions of heaven and hell usually appear in times of distress. They appear as a phenomenon of close proximity to other religions and, in this case, when the adherents of the other religion(s) mock and deride the prophet. To comfort the prophet, God not only reveals the fact that other apostles have been mocked before him, but as narrated in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, he is then immediately taken to heaven and is allowed entry into each level of heaven where he meets and speaks to the Biblical prophets who preceded him and were likewise mocked. In heaven, Muḥammad witnesses the horrors visited upon sinners (a vision he can barely tolerate and therefore he begs the angel to close the gate²¹) and the punishments others receive in the lower levels of heaven. Thus, the *mi'rāj* narrative serves as a premonitory warning and a foreshadowing of the subject of the following narrative: How God Deals with the Mockers.

Muḥammad's distress and the comfort he receives is parallel to the Zoroastrian priests' sadness at the state of disbelief within their religion. In the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg*, it is related that Ahriman guided Alexander the Great into Iran to create doubt among the believing population. Alexander enters Iran, burns the skins on which the *Avesta* was written, and kills several notable priests, nobles, scholars, and devout followers of the religion. Several centuries later priests, who were depressed and dispirited over the fact that "many religions and faiths, heresy, and doubt were manifest in the world" (Gignoux 2003, 71), gather together to remedy the ominous situation. At the meeting, they determine that their best course of action is to select and then send the most righteous among them to the afterlife to verify the truthfulness of the religion.

¹⁸ This experience appears in the Qur'ān as the first verse in *Sūrah XVII*. See footnote 4.

¹⁹ This appears in *Sūrah VI*.

²⁰ This is the verse from which the title of the narrative is derived.

²¹ Incidentally, *Ardā Wirāz* has a similar reaction at the threshold of the lowest level of hell.

As a result of Ardā Wirāz' journey through the afterlife, the priests and the community are relieved of their worries about the state of their religion and the efficacy of their practices.

The Condition

In both texts, women play unexpected roles in regards to the condition of the body and soul of Muḥammad and Ardā Wirāz during their visit to the afterlife. In the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, there are five reports of varying lengths dealing with the manner (physical or otherwise) in which Muḥammad journeyed to Jerusalem and his subsequent ascent to heaven. As Guillaume (1967, xx) notes, this suggests that there must have been some debate over the issue. Of the five reports there is a consensus among the men that the prophet experienced a vision. However, the two reports by the women in the prophet's family²² are by anonymous sources and testify to their intimate knowledge of the fact of his spirit travels. According to the prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah, "the prophet's body (may God bless him) was not missing, however, God made his soul travel by night" (Ibn Hishām, 270-271). The account by Umm Hānī, the prophet's cousin is as close to an eye witness account of the prophet's *isrā* and *mi'rāj* as physically possible, since she claims that the prophet never went on a night journey except in her house (272-273).²³

After Ardā Wirāz is chosen by the community, his seven sister-wives cry out in protest. They do not want their brother-husband to journey to the afterlife, since they do not know what will happen to him once he is there. The priests convince them that the only way to remedy the predicament in which the community finds itself is to let him go. The sister-wives finally agree and they are given the most important task of reciting prayers over Ardā Wirāz and guarding his physical body for seven days and nights while his soul traverses into the afterlife. Therefore, just as 'Ā'ishah and Umm Hānī play the most intimate role in regards to the prophet's spiritual journey, so do Ardā Wirāz' sister-wives in regards to their brother's travels.

²² The women's reports, interestingly enough, are the only two whose line of transmission is omitted.

²³ Umm Hānī's narrative is especially interesting since it reinforces Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's narrative (which is a description of the prophet's proof to the community that he did in fact travel in one night) as well as grants an actual "eye-witness" to the prophet's journey. It also details the exact time and location of the prophet immediately before the journey and immediately after.

The Guides and Their Functions

In both the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag* and *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Ardā Wirāz and Muḥammad are assisted by guides who accompany them throughout their travels in the afterlife. Muḥammad's guide in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* is Gabriel, the bearer of revelations to Muḥammad and generally the messenger of God to man. Ardā Wirāz' guides are Srōš, who guards souls for three days after death, and Ādur Yazd who presides over fire. Despite the different roles they play within the constraints of the respective religions, Gabriel, Srōš, and Ādur perform the same functions within these two narratives. As mentioned above, they gain the two visitors entry into the afterlife before their time (death) and provide two types of guidance: physical and eschatological.

In the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Gabriel's mission to guide the prophet begins on earth. Gabriel is sent to meet Muḥammad to take him on the night journey and ascend with him into heaven. He awakens Muḥammad from sleep and helps him onto the back of Burāq, the mythical beast who carries him to Jerusalem where a ladder appears for him to climb. Even though Gabriel accompanies Muḥammad throughout heaven and is recognized by his fellow angels and the ancient Biblical prophets, he must answer the same two questions regarding Muḥammad's identity and calling at each level of heaven in order for the prophet to gain entry (Ibn Hishām, 276). On the other hand, Srōš and Ādur Yazd meet Ardā Wirāz after he crosses over into the afterlife where they are surprised to see that he has entered before his time. When he mentions that he has come as a messenger of the community, they welcome him (Gignoux, 79).

Gabriel, Srōš, and Ādur Yazd accompany Muḥammad and Ardā Wirāz as guides and help them to navigate the different levels of the hereafter. As Muḥammad and Ardā Wirāz move from one level to the next, they are curious about the particular kinds of punishments or rewards visited upon souls. Prompted by what they witness, they ask the same question of their respective guide(s): "Who are they?" In response, the guides patiently provide answers in regard to the fate of the souls. In other words, the constructed narratives provide eschatological answers for the two communities.

Visions of the Afterlife

Before they approach the threshold, both men require different means of transportation to the afterlife. Muḥammad requires the winged Burāq to transport him to Jerusalem while Ardā Wirāz requires a special elixir. Once at the threshold, however, similar types of objects are required for crossing over: a

ladder is brought to Muḥammad at which time he and Gabriel climb it into heaven while Ardā Wirāz sees and crosses *Činwad Puhl* (bridge) which also allows him passage into purgatory, then heaven, and finally hell. Both Ardā Wirāz and Muḥammad must use physical objects at the threshold between the two worlds; these are objects that all souls (Muslim and Zoroastrian respectively) see before they cross at death. This illustrates that despite the special privilege(s) their status as righteous men grants them, the two must still pass over into the afterlife in the same manner as all the members of their respective communities.

With the assistance of his two guides, Ardā Wirāz safely passes over the bridge where he is allowed the opportunity to witness the process a soul undergoes after death²⁴ and by which it is judged. Ardā Wirāz notes that Rashn the Just holds in his hand a yellow golden balance to weigh the pious and the wicked (Gignoux, 83). Likewise, Muḥammad notices that Adam sits at one of the lower levels of heaven and “judges” the souls by declaring: “A good soul from a good body!” or “Ugh! A wicked soul from a wicked body” (Ibn Hishām, 274)!

In one of the lowest levels of heaven, Muḥammad witnesses four groups of sinners who receive grotesque and eternally disfiguring punishments. Ardā Wirāz, on the other hand, encounters approximately 75 sinners (either as groups of sinners or as individuals) who receive punishments that are particular to the committed sins. Nearly half of those sinners (they total approximately 35 in number) are usurers,²⁵ abusers of children,²⁶ and unfaithful men and women which corresponds almost exactly to the sins and punishments of those whom Muḥammad encounters.²⁷ For instance: 1-Unfaithful women suffer hanging from their breasts (Ibn Hishām, 275 and Gignoux, 111); 2-Usurers (Ibn Hishām, 274-275) and those who hoarded goods and did not distribute them (Gignoux, 115) are trampled by camels or demons respectively;²⁸ 3-Men who cheated on their wives are made to suffer eating lean stinking meats while good fatty meats lie nearby (Ibn Hishām, 275) or become cooked meat themselves (Gignoux, 137); 4-Those who were either necrophiliacs (Gignoux, 167) or

²⁴ Here the soul who has just entered the afterlife meets a beautiful women. When the soul sees her, he asks of her, “who are you?” and she replies that she is the representation of all his good thoughts, good deeds, and good actions on earth.

²⁵ Among these I include those who withhold hospitality and cheat or steal the wealth of others for undue gain.

²⁶ Physical and/or emotional abusers, or those who abused the wealth of children.

²⁷ The rest are distributed among sins such as violation of purity rituals, animal abuse, lies, and instigating or inciting people to civil unrest for the mere sake of it.

²⁸ Usurers in the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg* suffer the fate of eating the skins of others.

“ate” the wealth of children (Ibn Hishām, 274) suffer regurgitating their excrement.

Such comparisons, which are usually reserved for analyzing works of literature,²⁹ are not meant to explain away the complex eschatology of either religion. However, it is no mere coincidence either that the four types of sins and/or punishments that are addressed in the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* cover nearly half of the sins represented in the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmag*, that women are present and bear witness to the fact that it is the souls of their men which travel, or that both men require guides and similar physical objects to gain entry into the afterlife.

Not much is known about the form and content of the *Ardā Wirāz* narrative before it was redacted into its final form in the tenth century. However, if we subscribe to the idea that there was a competitive dialogue that inspired theologians and historians to compose specific texts within certain genres, which pre-existed in the canons of their surrounding neighbors, then we can answer the questions how and why genre-specific texts appear and reappear with similar structures, themes, and elements. If Muslim historians and theologians turned to Zoroastrian concepts and Iranian histories to either help explain certain enigmas or to establish supremacy, so too were Iranians³⁰ and Zoroastrians preoccupied with the survival of their histories and religion respectively. The results, as they exist in the form of the extant sources, are: the tenet that caused the formation of the Mu‘tazilah school; the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* and its Persian translation; Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-al-Mulūk* and its Persian translation; the redaction and translation into Arabic of many Middle Persian histories and theological texts; and the rising number of later and independent ‘*isrā* and *mi‘rāj* narratives³¹ among many other texts. These texts represent the competitive dialogues that transpired between peoples whose motivations, backgrounds, and complex religious beliefs are widely different. The continual competition between these peoples inspired each group to envision heaven and hell as they fit the tenets of their religion while addressing rival groups who had their own visions of the afterlife. For posterity and the modern reader, these texts (when viewed together) illustrate best the idea of “continuity and change” to borrow a term from Morony (2005); they continue the traditions of their own religions while simultaneously incorporating elements of other surrounding religions and traditions.

²⁹ Though literature in its modern sense does not apply here, Ibn Ishāq used “anonymous” sources (as we saw with ‘Ā’ishah and Umm Hānī’s accounts) and early accounts by those who were known for transmitting popular stories. Though Ibn Ishāq was writing history the lines between story telling and reporting historical events was still blurred. Later biographers of the prophet and transmitters of *Ḥadīth* developed a “science” for determining reliable transmitters and criticized Ibn Ishāq’s work for its lack of stringency.

³⁰ As Muslims and Zoroastrians.

³¹ The most famous of these are Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Kitāb al-Isrā ilā al-Maqam al-Asrā* and the illustrated *Mi‘rāj-nāmah* in the Bibliothèque National Paris.

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